

It's Not the Tool — It's the Toolee!

Ball mark repair in the 21st century.

BY LARRY GILHULY

In the early '90s, a revolution hit the golf industry that changed how a golf ball rolled on putting greens — the introduction of spikeless alternatives that replaced “traditional” metal spikes. While ridiculed early by many players who assumed that metal spikes must be retained for traction, this slow-to-catch-on idea began to snowball as players found the combination of comfort and improving traction with various models made a real difference on creeping bentgrass, bermudagrass, and *Poa annua* dominated surfaces. The idea was simple — just remove “traditional” metal spikes from golf shoes, replace them with a good spikeless alternative, institute a metal spikes ban, and presto — your greens were significantly improved. There were no spike marks and not nearly the amount of wear noted around the holes due to foot traffic. Not perfect, but good enough to produce surfaces so much better that today the vast majority of players wear spikeless alternatives, and this issue is now virtually non-existent.

Enter the 21st century, and another way golfers negatively impact greens (ball marks) is undergoing a potential revolution with a myriad of manufacturers making claims that golf tees and “traditional” two-pronged tools need to be eliminated and only their type of new tool is the “answer” for all ball marks. While some of these tools have potential or have improved greens and are being marketed as *the only* answer, is it really the tool or simply the toolee?

As opposed to the spikeless alternative tsunami that washed over golf in

the '90s, when golfers simply walked on the greens and improvement occurred, ball mark repair involves actual human thought — of which most players are either not educated or untrainable! The second problem is that all ball marks are not the same and all grasses are not the same when repaired. Let's look at the first problem — most golfers simply do not know how to fix ball marks properly.

Other than the new types of ball mark repair tools that either have shortened prongs or use a pinching action, the real problem with tees and two-pronged ball mark repair tools is that they are simply too long. When extended into the ground and lifted or twisted harshly, exposed soil is left behind with damaged plants on the ball mark perimeter. If nothing else, please remember this — **push your ball marks back toward the center; do not lift or twist harshly.** Ball marks can be fixed just as expertly with a two-pronged tool or tee by following these three simple rules:

1. Shorten the tee/prong length to no more than ½" to ¾". This can be accomplished easily where the forefinger acts as a base, with the thumb providing the pushing action.

2. Push the ball mark from the back side first. As a golf ball lands on a green, the “back” side of the ball mark will have the most turf displacement. This is where the most pushing should occur, and with some ball marks this is all that is needed.

3. Push the ball mark from the sides. The two sides of the ball mark

can also be slightly displaced, so the second and third areas to push back are the sides. In some cases a small amount of twisting may be necessary, but under no circumstances should the turf be ripped toward the center. Also, the leading edge of the ball mark generally requires no pushing, as the turf has not been affected.

The second problem with some of the new ball mark repair tools is their short prongs or pinching action that simply cannot get to the center of deep *Poa annua* and creeping bentgrass ball marks, which can occur on many golf courses in cooler climates. This is especially true where *Poa annua* dominates, such as the Pacific Northwest, the California coast, and much of the northern Midwest and Northeast. These deep ball marks cannot be fixed with anything but a longer pronged device, and *Poa annua* does not respond as negatively as creeping bentgrass and hybrid bermudagrass when it is slightly twisted in an effort to level the ball marks in a cooler climate.

Bottom line — any player can fix every ball mark properly with a tee or two-pronged device, just as he or she can with some of the new repair tools, with the exception of deep ball marks. It is not the tool, but the toolee that truly determines how well a ball mark is repaired!

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